CHAPTER 2

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY OF SELF-ESTEEM

Sheldon Solomon
Jeff Greenberg
Tom Pyszczynski

Many researchers and clinicians would agree that self-esteem mediates many social behaviors and is a vitally important determinant of mental health. In addition, a number of quite fruitful theory-guided lines of research concerning self-esteem have been developed (e.g., Brockner’s work on behavioral plasticity [1979], Bandura’s work on self-efficacy [1982], and Tesser’s work on self-evaluation maintenance [Tesser & Campbell, 1983]). Based on this research and on 10 to 11 thousand other studies that have investigated the relationship between feelings of self-esteem and various behaviors since the 1950s (cf. Scheff, 1990), we conclude that individuals are generally motivated to maintain self-esteem and that measures of self-esteem covary positively with other indicators of well-being.

Beyond that, however, little is known about what self-esteem is, what psychological purposes it serves, and how it is related to social behavior and mental and physical health. As Scheff (1990) and others (see, e.g., Diggory, 1966; Crandall, 1973; Savin-Williams & Demo, 1983; Jackson, 1984; Wells & Marwell, 1976; Wylie, 1979) have forcefully contended, an exhaustive, empirically driven review of the self-esteem literature, with its hundreds of measures, procedures, and often contradictory results, would be a fruitless waste of paper demonstrating the “utter bankruptcy of it all” (Diggory, 1966) and leaving fundamental questions about the nature of self-esteem unbroached. Crandall (1973) neatly summed up the existing state of affairs in this area when he observed that “Despite the popularity of self-esteem, no standard theoretical or operational definition exists.”

We have recently proposed a terror management theory of self-esteem and social behavior (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, in press) as a conceptual framework that offers answers to some basic questions about self-esteem and can be used to make sense of the existing literature and guide research and clinical practice in meaningful directions. In this chapter, we will present our conception of what self-esteem is and what functions it serves, followed by a summary of relevant empirical work. We will then explain how a variety of
psychological and physical problems result from a lack of self-esteem. Finally, we will explore some of the implications of these notions for clinical practice and social science.

THE FUNCTION OF SELF-ESTEEM

Terror management theory is derived primarily from the work of Ernest Becker (1962, 1964, 1971, 1973, 1975). Becker attempted to synthesize the psychoanalytic work of Freud, Rank, Adler, Fromm, and Horney; the philosophical inquiry of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Norman Brown; the sociological psychiatry of Harry Stack Sullivan; and the sociological analyses of Erving Goffman, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann into a broad integrated theoretical conception of human social behavior.

Starting from a basic evolutionary perspective, Becker hypothesized that human survival has been greatly facilitated by our intelligence, particularly our ability to think in symbolic or abstract terms, anticipate future events, and imagine what does not yet exist and then realize such possibilities. However, the complex structure of the brain that allows us to be intelligent also renders us self-conscious. Being directly aware of our existence includes the associated existential baggage of being aware of our inevitable ultimate fate: death and nonexistence. Not only are humans aware that they will all ultimately die, but they also are aware that death often occurs unexpectedly and uncontrollably. The lucky person is thus unwillingly born into a frenzied free-for-all where one competes against others for survival in a world with limited resources, destined to live for an infinitesimally small period of time (from an absolute perspective at least) followed by an inevitable death with its associated decay and physical decomposition. The unlucky person is born in similar circumstances, only to be negated unexpectedly by an earthquake, tidal wave, sniper's bullet, or an infinite number of other possible lethal experiences.

Becker speculated that human beings would be riddled with abject terror if they were constantly aware of their mortality and the possibility of death at any time. Consequently, cultural worldviews began to evolve as means to ameliorate the anxiety associated with the uniquely human awareness of death. For Becker, then, culture is a symbolic perceptual construction shared by groups of people to serve the essentially defensive function of minimizing the anxiety associated with the awareness of death.

The cultural worldview provides the basis for minimizing anxiety by imbuing the universe with order, stability, and permanence. Accordingly, all cultures have an explanation of how the earth was created, have prescriptions for how one should behave, and have explanations for what happens to people after they die. For example, in the Judeo-Christian tradition we are taught that God created the earth in 6 days and then took a break. The Fulani tribe in Mali believe that the earth was created out of a giant drop of milk. What all creation myths share in common is patent absurdity from a scientific point of view; they simply cannot be true. What is important here is the recognition that culture is not generally directed toward revealing the truth, but rather toward obscuring the horrifying possibility that we live in a random and indeterminant universe, in which the only certainty is death.

Two points should be noted here. First, we are not suggesting (nor is Becker) that culture is purely symbolic and only serves a death-denying function. Rather, we are claiming that this is a vitally important aspect of culture and that no adequate explanation of culture and/or of human behavior can be complete without a recognition of its death-denying symbolic qualities. This position is in marked contrast to some current anthropological conceptions of culture, especially Harris' cultural materialism (1979), which emphasizes the material aspects of culture while insisting on the ridiculous notion that the symbolic aspects of culture are of little use for understanding human behavior.

Second, terror management theory views the fear of death as the emotional manifestation of the instinct for self-preservation. Accordingly, all anxiety is ultimately derived from, and related to, the fear of death (see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, in press; Yalom, 1980; or Becker, 1973, for a more complete discussion of this idea).

Culture reduces anxiety for the individual by offering protection and hope of immortality, either symbolically or in reality, to those who live up to cultural prescriptions of value. Symbolically, culture provides opportunities for the production of tangible expressions of our existence that transcend our physical lives. Monuments, works of art and literature, estates, children, and so forth are all examples of symbolic immortality (Plato discussed this idea several thousand years ago). Addi
tionally, cultures promote the notion that good things happen to good people and bad things do not (cf. Lerner, 1980). Finally, most organized religions claim that adherents who behave properly will literally be rewarded with eternal life. For example, Christianity promises eternal life for those who lead the “good life” on earth, whereas the Hindus promise eternal life unencumbered by bodily existence for those who reach nirvana.

Note that while perceiving oneself as a part of a meaningful universe is necessary for anxiety-free action, it is not sufficient. People must also feel that they are serving a uniquely valuable role in the context of that meaningful universe in order to qualify for safety and immortality and thus function with equanimity. To help individuals achieve this, all cultures provide prescriptions for “appropriate” behavior and valued roles; and people can feel valuable only by living up to those standards and role expectations.

The psychiatrist Alan Wheelis made a remarkably similar observation about the nature and function of culture in his novel *The Scheme of Things*:

>The scheme of things is a system of order. Beginning as our view of the world, it finally becomes our world. We live within the space defined by its coordinates. It is self-evidently true, is accepted so naturally and automatically that one is not aware of an act of acceptance having taken place. It comes with one’s mother’s milk, is chanted in school, proclaimed from the White House, insinuated by television, validated at Harvard. Like the air we breathe, the scheme of things disappears, becomes simply reality, the way things are. It is the lie necessary to life. The world as it exists beyond that scheme becomes vague, irrelevant, largely unperceived, finally nonexistent. . . .

No scheme of things has ever been both coextensive with the way things are and also true to the way things are. All schemes of things involve limitation and denial. . . .

A scheme of things is a plan for salvation. How well it works will depend upon its scope and authority. If it is small, even great achievement in its service does little to dispel death. A scheme of things may be as large as Christianity or as small as the Alameda County Bowling League. We seek the largest possible scheme of things, not in a reaching out for truth, but because the more comprehensive the scheme the greater its promise of banishing dread. If we can make our lives mean something in a cosmic scheme we will live in the certainty of immortality. Those attributes of a scheme of things that determine its durability and success are its scope, the opportunity it offers for participation and contribution, and the conviction with which it is held as self-evidently true. . . . (cf. Hofstadter, 1985, p. 57)

Based on the preceding analysis, we propose that self-esteem consists of the perception that one is a valuable part of a meaningful universe, and that self-esteem serves the essentially defensive purpose of buffering anxiety. An important question to consider at this point is how the perception that one is a valuable part of a meaningful universe comes to serve an anxiety-reducing function for the individual.

Terror management theory asserts that as children we come to associate being good with being safe as a consequence of the socialization process. Specifically, as Freud and others (e.g., Bowlby, 1973) have suggested, little children become especially anxious when basic needs or wants are not met, and that part of this anxiety is due to the fear that their parents will abandon them. Darwin also felt that it made evolutionary sense for profoundly immature and utterly dependent creatures (human infants) to be especially anxious in such circumstances because their distress probably would be noticed by caretakers and would be attended to accordingly.

During socialization, children’s behavior must be altered to conform to social dictates (e.g., no tap dancing on the white sofa with muddy shoes) and to protect their physical well-being (e.g., no sitting on the barbeque grill while the coals are lit). Consequently, children are rewarded for engaging in socially appropriate behaviors and punished for engaging in socially inappropriate behaviors. At this time in their lives, children view their parents as all-encompassing repositories of strength and wisdom. To be rewarded by parents for being good (i.e., for behaving according to cultural prescription) is thus functionally equivalent to basking in the omniscient glow of our parents’ approval and its associated power. Hence, behaving according to cultural dictates (being good) results in parental approval, which results in feeling safe and secure. Not behaving according to cultural dictates renders children anxious and insecure by virtue of a loss of parental approval and the associated possibility of abandonment and annihilation. Consequently, children must learn to control their behavior so that they can maintain parental approval and thereby keep their anxieties to a minimum (i.e., by being a “good” person and behaving according to cultural demands). Children seem to accomplish this by internalizing the
parental standards of value and learning to judge themselves accordingly; once having done so they are capable of viewing themselves as good and therefore protected, or as bad and therefore in danger (because of the threat of punishment or loss of protection). In this way, self-esteem (the perception that one is good) becomes an anxiety-buffer.

Theoretically, this analysis is generally consistent with the work of such diverse theorists as Cooley, Mead, Horney, Sullivan, and Kohut. While the agreement of psychoanalytic and symbolic interactionist theorists in this regard is noteworthy, perhaps even more impressive is that theorists concerned with artificial intelligence also have converged on these ideas. For example, Marvin Minsky (1987), who attempts to understand human behavior based on studies of artificial intelligence observed the following in *The Society of Mind*:

Suppose a child were playing in a certain way, and a stranger appeared and began to scold and criticize. The child would become frightened and disturbed and try to escape. But if, in the same situation, the child’s parent arrived and proceeded to scold and criticize, the result would be different. Instead of being frightened, the child would feel guilty and ashamed, and instead of trying to escape, the child would try to change what it was doing, in attempts to seek reassurance and approval. . . . If my theory is right, the presence of the attachment-person actually switches the effect of learning over to different sets of agents. . . . So far as I know, *this is a new theory about attachment*. It asserts that there are particular types of learning that can proceed only in the presence of the particular individuals to whom one has become attached [italics added]. . . . (p. 175)

Then, our attachment mechanisms force us to focus on our parents’ ways, and this leads us to build crude images of what those parents themselves are like. That way, the values and goals of a culture pass from one generation to the next. They are not learned the way skills are learned. We learn our earliest values under the influence of attachment-related signals that represent, not our own success or failure, but our parents’ love or rejection. . . . Many people dislike the thought of being dominated from within by the image of a parent’s wish. Yet, in exchange, that slavery is just what makes us relatively free (as compared with other animals) from being forced to obey so many other kinds of unlearned, built-in instinct-goals. (p. 181)

Children thus learn through the socialization process to equate being good with being safe by virtue of their interactions with their parents and significant others. Over time, however, children realize that their parents are imperfect and mortal and cannot protect them from all aversive experiences, especially their own inevitable deaths. It is at this point that a vague fear of annihilation via abandonment is replaced by an existential fear of death. From this point on the anxiety-buffering properties of self-esteem must be sufficient to minimize the terror of the ultimate threat of inevitable and absolute annihilation. This can only be accomplished by expanding the basis of self-esteem. Only then can self-esteem help one to transcend death.

Children respond to the realization of their parents’ limitations and their own mortality in two ways: ambivalence toward the parents and a shift in the basis of self-esteem from the parents to the culture. Ambivalence is caused by our anger that our parents cannot really give us what we genuinely want and thought that they could provide—unlimited resources, permanent protection from all negative events now and in the future, and eternal life. Parents consequently lose the power to provide self-esteem, at least totally. Children experience terror as a result, and that terror impels the children to broaden their basis of self-esteem, primarily by attempting to adhere directly to the religious and secular values and standards espoused by their culture. In this way their goodness can earn them the approval and protection of God and powerful others (e.g., the president). For the vast majority of children, this transition is relatively easy because most parents teach their kids about religion, patriotism, and other death-denying symbolic possibilities before their first existential crisis. From this point on, self-esteem is a perception that one is fulfilling the requirements of value of the accepted cultural worldview.

**Summary of the Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem**

To summarize, the uniquely human need for self-esteem is a consequence of the anxiety associated with the uniquely human awareness of mortality conferred by self-consciousness. Self-esteem is made possible by the development of cultural worldviews, which provide a stable and meaningful conception of the universe, social roles with specific prescriptions for behaviors that are deemed valuable, and the promise of safety and immortality to those who satisfy those prescrip-
tions. Self-esteem is therefore a cultural contrivance consisting of two components: a meaningful conception of the universe combined with the perception that one is meeting the standards for value within that culturally contrived reality. The primary function of self-esteem is to buffer anxiety.

**SELF-ESTEEM AS AN ANXIETY BUFFER**

Both correlational and experimental research support the notion that self-esteem helps people minimize anxiety. First, there is a consistent relationship between chronic self-esteem and anxiety. Individuals with chronically low self-esteem are especially prone to anxiety in general (e.g., French, 1968; Lipsitt, 1958; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Strauss, Frame, & Forehand, 1987), and death anxiety in particular (Templer, 1971); they also have particularly pessimistic views of the future (Coopersmith, 1967). Second, studies of the emotional mediation of the self-serving attributional bias (e.g., Fries & Frey, 1980; Gollwitzer, Earle, & Stephan, 1982) and affective reactions to self-esteem-threatening tests (e.g., Bennett & Holmes, 1975; Burish & Houston, 1979; Leary, Barnes, & Griebel, 1986) demonstrate that situationally imposed threats to self-esteem also engender anxiety.

DeLongis, Folkman, and Lazarus (1988) recently investigated the relationship between daily stress on health and mood as it is mediated by self-esteem and social support. Consistent with their predictions and with terror management theory, people with low self-esteem had significantly higher correlations between self-reported hassles on a given day and self-reported somatic symptoms on that day and on the following day, even when the effects of social support were partialed out, suggesting that people with low self-esteem are more likely to suffer physical ailments following stressful circumstances than are people with high self-esteem. DeLongis et al. interpreted these results by suggesting that people with high self-esteem are "less likely to feel overwhelmed when confronted with stressful demands than . . . people who do not have positive views." Our explanation for these findings is that, lacking an anxiety-buffer, people with low self-esteem experience far more debilitating anxiety when hassles occur than do people with high self-esteem.

Self-esteem did not influence the relationship between self-reported hassles and mood, but social support did. Specifically, subjects with strong social support networks felt better the same day when self-reported hassles were high (but not the day after self-reported hassles were high). Social support was not found to be related to somatic symptoms on or following stressful days.

Similar relationships between low self-esteem and ineffective responses to stress have been found for police officers (Lester, 1986), firemen (Petrie & Rotheram, 1982), recently widowed elderly people (Johnson, Lund, & Dimond, 1986), wives of soldiers sent to war (Hobfoll & London, 1986), women who have experienced difficult pregnancies (Hobfoll & Leiberman, 1987), recently unemployed individuals (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981), medical students completing surgical internships (Linn & Zeppa, 1984), abused children (Zimrin, 1986), and new parents (Ososky, 1985).

Although all of the above research is highly consistent with our proposal that self-esteem is an anxiety-buffer, it is all correlational and thus subject to a variety of alternative explanations. Indeed, any study that assesses the relationship between dispositional self-esteem and other variables will be inconclusive because so many personality and demographic variables covary with self-esteem. To provide stronger evidence concerning the terror management hypothesis that self-esteem functions to buffer anxiety, it is necessary to manipulate self-esteem in an experimental context. If self-esteem is an anxiety-buffer, then individuals whose self-esteem is raised should experience less anxiety than control subjects when exposed to anxiety-provoking stimuli.

To test this hypothesis, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, Lyon, and Rosenblatt (1989, Study 1) gave subjects either positive or neutral personality feedback and then exposed them to either a gory videotape of death scenes or innocuous material. A postmanipulation Rosenberg self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) showed that the positive feedback subjects reported higher self-esteem than the neutral feedback subjects. In general, there was a main effect such that the death video led to higher self-reported anxiety on the Spielberger State Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970) than the neutral video. However, this main effect was qualified by the predicted interaction, which showed that the death video led to an elevation in self-reported anxiety in the neutral personality feedback condition but not in the positive personality feedback condition.

In a second study (Greenberg et al., 1989, Study
2) subjects were given success or no feedback on an ego-relevant anagram test and then were led to expect either random electrical shocks or no shocks. The predicted interaction was found again, this time on galvanic skin response, a physiological indicator of anxiety. Under threat of shock, no feedback subjects exhibited greater arousal than success subjects; in the no shock conditions, arousal was similarly low for both groups. In a third study (Greenberg et al., 1989, Study 3), this interaction effect was replicated using false personality feedback rather than anagram test feedback to manipulate self-esteem. Although further research is needed to unambiguously establish that self-esteem is an anxiety buffer, these three experiments provide support for terror management theory through the consistent finding that raising self-esteem reduces the amount of anxiety engendered by threatening events.

Interestingly, in both studies 2 and 3, self-reports of anxiety, although in the predicted directions, did not yield the significant interactions found on GSR. We would speculate that the threat of shock places a high demand on subjects to report anxiety, whether felt or not; however, further research will be needed to determine the precise causes of this discrepancy between self-report and physiological measures of anxiety.

**SELF-ESTEEM AND ADAPTATION**

Our analysis suggests that adaptation can be conceptualized as the minimizing of anxiety through the perception that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe. Accordingly, social behavior is primarily directed toward the acquisition and maintenance of self-esteem, which in turn can vary depending on transient or permanent changes in people's perceptions of their value and/or of the meaningfulness of the context in which they make such evaluative judgments about themselves. Put another way, self-esteem is a function of both value and meaning, and will change when either component is altered.

It is important to note that both the cultural worldview and one's value within it are purely social constructions (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967); therefore, these two components of the cultural anxiety buffer are validated and/or threatened primarily by other people. Thus, terror management theory suggests that a good deal of social behavior is directed toward seeking validation of, and avoiding threats to, value and meaning.

Only those who share one's basic worldview can threaten one's personal value directly, because only they use the same basis of judging value; thus, value is threatened primarily by others within the culture. In contrast, meaning is more commonly threatened by those outside the culture who espouse an alternative worldview of what is meaningful and valuable. It is worth noting that other theories, such as the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), posit that individuals seek social assessment of their beliefs, whereas terror management theory posits that individuals seek social confirmation of them.

When either value or meaning are undermined, individuals should experience anxiety and engage in compensatory responses, the character and duration of which would be determined by the locus and severity of the threat, whether the threat to value and meaning is chronic (stable) or acute (temporary), and the predispositions of the persons involved in conjunction with their specific prior experiences. Terror management theory thus posits that psychological problems (as well as some physical problems) can be understood as products of the anxiety resulting from an inability to acquire and/or maintain self-esteem.

**Short-Term Consequences of Acute Threats to the Cultural Anxiety**

**Threats to Value**

Terror management theory posits that (a) threats to self-esteem will lead to anxiety; (b) when self-esteem is threatened, individuals will be highly motivated to minimize the effects of the threat on self-esteem; and (c) when threats are minimized, the anxiety will be reduced. The available evidence is highly consistent with all three hypotheses. We have already noted that there is solid evidence that threats to self-esteem engender anxiety. There is also a large and continually growing literature documenting that such threats activate a variety of compensatory responses. Among the best documented self-esteem maintenance strategies are self-serving attributions (e.g., Miller, 1976), self-handicapping (e.g., Berglas & Jones, 1978), compensatory self-inflation (e.g., Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985), symbolic self-completion (e.g., Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982), basking and blasting (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980), downward social comparati-
son (e.g., Hakmiller, 1966), false perceptions of uniqueness and consensus (e.g., Campbell, 1986), and altering perceptions of similarity to try to identify with and avoid comparison with superior others (e.g., Tesser, 1980). It has also been persuasively argued that many cognitive dissonance findings may have resulted from a need to defend self-esteem (e.g., Aronson, 1968; Bowerman, 1978; Steele & Liu, 1983). Additionally, in accord with our emphasis on the socially derived nature of self-esteem, it has been found that public failure activates particularly strong defensive reactions (e.g., Frey, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). For overviews of this literature, see Greenberg et al. (1986), Pyszczynski and Greenberg (1987), and Snyder and Higgins (1988).

The general tenor of these findings is that there are a variety of relatively easy cognitive and behavioral alterations that can be used to restore or protect one's self-esteem when it is threatened. Although not empirically established, there are probably also a variety of more active behavioral responses that are not uncommon; for example, increasing efforts to display one's prowess, whether via intellectual, athletic, social, or financial accomplishments, or, when appropriate, simply by eliminating or undermining the validity of the threatener.

For the most part, we would argue that to the extent these defenses are effective, they are short-term contributors to the threatened individual's mental and physical health because by restoring self-esteem they minimize the anxiety resulting from the threat.

We hedge a bit here because we can envision situations in which self-esteem defense might not be beneficial in the long run. For example, if the strategy led to negative reactions from others, such reactions from validators of one's self-worth could create more damage to self-esteem than the defensive strategy attempted to avert. Similarly, excessively unrealistic beliefs in the service of self-esteem maintenance could help perpetuate failure in both the social and achievement realms; for example, a male with poor social skills who cannot get dates but continually attributes his failures to the attributes of those who reject him. (See, for example, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Schlenker, 1985.) There is surprisingly little empirical evidence on the consequences of self-esteem maintenance strategies; what does exist is, however, consistent with this analysis. McFarland and Ross (1982) found that self-serving attributions after failure minimize the negative impact of failure on both self-esteem and affect. Other research suggests that non-self-protective attributions may contribute to long-term negative affect. A variety of correlational studies have shown that internal attributions for negative outcomes and the absence of a self-serving pattern of attributions are associated with depression (see Peterson & Seligman, 1984, for a review). In a particularly compelling example of this work, Rothwell and Williams (1983) found that an inclination toward internal attributions for failure predicted low self-esteem and depression in males who lost their jobs.

Affective responses to negative outcomes also seem to covary with the nature of self-esteem–relevant social comparisons. For example, Bennett and Holmes (1975) found that after failing an intelligence test, people who were encouraged to guess that their friends would have also done poorly on the test (which lessens the implications of the failure for self-esteem) were subsequently less anxious than those who were not. Similarly, Burish and Houston (1979) found that after a challenging intelligence test, individuals' subsequent anxiety was lowered if they were encouraged to engage in either of two defenses: claiming that the experimenter inhibited their performance or guessing that their friends would perform poorly on the test. Additionally, research on social comparison following negative outcomes indicates that comparing downward (i.e., with others worse than oneself), which casts the self in a relatively positive light, is associated with decreases in self-reported distress, anxiety, and depressive mood, and with increases in life satisfaction (Hakmiller, 1966; Crocker & Gallo, 1985).

Two studies have also found beneficial effects of providing people with excuses for future failure. Arkin and Baumgardner (1985, cited in Baumgardner & Arkin, 1987) had opposite-sex pairs engage in a conversation while they were exposed to white noise. They told half of the subjects that the noise would interfere with their social performance (thereby providing an excuse should they perform poorly). Socially anxious individuals (but not nonanxious individuals, who are unlikely to expect social failure) rated their interaction more enjoyable and themselves more relaxed when they believed the noise could serve as an excuse for failure than when they did not. In a similar study, Leary (1986) found that subjects
who believed that noise would interfere with performance had lower pulse rates than did those who did not. As expected, this difference was especially great for socially anxious individuals.

Finally, Mehlman and Snyder (1985) demonstrated that simply giving people the opportunity to minimize a failure can be beneficial. Specifically, they manipulated performance outcome and then gave half of the subjects a questionnaire that allowed them to minimize the implications of failure for self-esteem. In addition, half of these subjects believed that they were attached to a lie detector while filling out the questionnaire. The opportunity to minimize the failure led to high anxiety and hostility among the failure subjects in the lie detector condition. Presumably, the lie detector undermined the utility of the opportunity to minimize the failure. In contrast, in the no lie detector condition, failure subjects reported less anxiety and hostility when they had the opportunity to minimize the failure than when they did not.

To summarize, research has found that threats to self-esteem cause anxiety and that people use a wide variety of strategies to defend self-esteem when it is threatened. In addition, when these defenses are used, or when conditions facilitate their use, anxiety and other forms of negative affect are reduced. The evidence to date is thus highly consistent with terror management theory. We are not suggesting that there are not other plausible theoretical accounts for the phenomena that we have just reviewed (usually the specific theoretical formulation used to generate a particular piece of research). What we are claiming instead is that while terror management theory can account for all of these findings, no other single conceptual framework that we are aware of is able to do so. Additionally, there are a number of empirical findings obtained from studies testing hypotheses derived from terror management theory (to be described later) that cannot be explained in terms of other theoretical perspectives.

**Threats to Meaning**

As with value, threats to meaning should engender anxiety and defenses, and such defenses should in turn reduce anxiety. Unfortunately, there is little research directly relevant to these hypotheses. In the one study we have found in which subjects' central beliefs were experimentally challenged, Batson (1975) presented Christian church-goers with evidence threatening the validity of their beliefs and found evidence of a compensatory increase in their reported faith. Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) observed a religious group's reaction when the day it predicted the world was going to end came and went. Similar to Batson's findings, they found that this rather blatant disconfirmation of their worldview seemed to lead to posthoc rationalizations, increased faith, and renewed efforts to gain more fellow validators of their faith.

More indirectly, there is substantial evidence that people react negatively to deviants, those with dissimilar attitudes, and outgroup members (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Miller & Anderson, 1979; Roakech, 1968; Schachter, 1951). In addition, a number of studies suggest that negative reactions to outgroup members result primarily from the assumption that they have different values (Goldstein & Davison, 1972; Moe, Nacoste, & Insko, 1981). These findings are consistent with our analysis, in that those who do not conform to our values, those who do not agree with our attitudes, and those who accept an alternative worldview implicitly threaten our faith in the validity of our worldview. Consistent with the notion that derogation of outgroup members results from concerns about a threat to one's worldview, prior to the 1980 United States presidential election, Cooper and Mackie (1983) found that when members of a pro-Reagan group were induced to write arguments supporting the re-election of Carter, they subsequently derogated members of a pro-Carter group. Thus, threatening a central belief encouraged derogation of members of a group with contradictory views.

A number of studies have recently been conducted to directly assess the terror management explanation for negative reactions to those who do not conform to one's worldview. In the first set of six studies (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), it was hypothesized that if derogation of deviants results in part from the implicit threat to the cultural worldview, then when subjects are made to think of their own deaths, they should be especially concerned with maintaining the cultural worldview and therefore should be especially punitive toward someone who violates cultural values. The six studies found consistent support for this hypothesis while eliminating mood congruency, arousal, and self-awareness alternative explanations.

A second set of three studies (Greenberg et al.,
in press) assessed whether mortality salience also would encourage derogation of outgroup members, dissimilar others, and those who directly criticize the accepted culture. In addition, these studies assessed whether mortality salience would encourage positive evaluations of fellow ingroup members, similar others, and those who directly praise the culture. In Study 1, as predicted, when mortality was salient, Christian subjects rated a fellow Christian especially positively and a Jew especially negatively. In Study 2, when mortality was salient, high authoritarians tended to rate an attitudinally similar other very favorably and clearly rated a dissimilar other very unfavorably. However, low authoritarians did not show this tendency (perhaps because open-mindedness and tolerance are part of their worldview). In Study 3, as predicted, mortality salience led to especially favorable ratings of one who praised the culture and especially unfavorable ratings of one who criticized the culture. Finally, our most recent study has shown that prior to the 1988 presidential election, mortality salience encouraged positive reactions to George Bush among Bush supporters, but not among Dukakis supporters (Pyszczynski, Becker, Gracey, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1989).

The 10 mortality salience studies conducted thus far support our contentions that (a) threats to meaning encourage negative reactions, compensatory responses, and derogation of threateners; and (b) that these responses are motivated by terror management concerns. None of these studies, however, has assessed whether such reactions actually reduce anxiety. In addition, there is no systematic evidence that implicit or explicit threats to the meaning component of the cultural anxiety buffer engender anxiety, although such a notion seems to fit a wide variety of historical events (e.g., reactions to Galileo, Darwin and innumerable others whose ideas challenged accepted belief systems). Thus, overall the existing evidence concerning short-term threats to meaning is highly consistent with our analysis, but a number of important hypotheses have yet to be investigated.

Long-Term Consequences of Chronic Threats to the Cultural Anxiety Buffer

Terror management theory proposes that chronic low self-esteem results from an inability to maintain a sense that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe. At this point it is impossible to determine if chronic low self-esteem is due to the chronic absence of value or meaning (recall that a terror management analysis would predict low self-esteem in either case). We can conceive of situations where people accept the cosmology given them by their culture, but are simply unable to perceive themselves as valuable persons within that context (e.g., a person who believes that all Americans who try hard enough can be financially successful, but who makes minimum wage and therefore sees him/herself as a failure).

Similarly, there may be circumstances where it is difficult or impossible for people to sustain a meaningful conception of the world at all (in which case there can be no sense of value). Available worldviews may simply be inadequate for acquiring meaning given specific individual circumstances. For example, members of minority groups may have an especially difficult time maintaining self-esteem because they are caught between two cultural contexts, neither of which provides a sufficient basis for self-worth. On the one hand their traditional worldviews have been severely distorted or threatened by the dominant culture; on the other hand, the dominant culture is either not acceptable because it historically treated the minority group horribly, or because it does not convince the minority individual that he or she will be given the opportunity to acquire value. Alternatively, other people may simply be constitutionally or experientially unable to sustain meaning entirely. Becker (1973) has suggested that this may be the case for schizophrenics.

Whatever the reason for the inability to sustain meaning, our theory suggests that the individual will either suffer chronic low self-esteem and its consequences (discussed below), or will find an alternative worldview that is more compelling (although the latter option may be problematic for schizophrenics). Interestingly, recent research on religious conversions is highly consistent with this analysis. Ullman (1982) found that religious conversions (to Judaism, Catholicism, and the Hare Krishna and Bahai faiths) are often preceded by acute stress and chronic low self-esteem, and the religious converts reported more markedly negative impressions of their parents than nonconverts. Additionally, Paloutzian (1981) found that people report having a greater purpose in life and a diminished fear of death directly following religious conversion.

Regardless of whether value or meaning is not being sustained, the lack of self-esteem will
engender anxiety that results in maladaptive psychological and/or physical responses. Individuals with low self-esteem are likely to be very susceptible to anxiety when their value system is threatened. In addition, lacking much of an anxiety-buffer, they are likely to react to the anticipation and experience of minor and major negative life events with a great deal of anxiety. Thus, people with low self-esteem will suffer the effects of both long-term accumulations and extreme acute doses of anxiety.

Research suggests that this anxiety may contribute directly to psychological and physical problems (cf. Yalom, 1980); in addition, the anxiety may contribute indirectly to such problems via its relation to stress. Our analysis and research (e.g., the self-esteem anxiety-buffer studies reported above) indicate that individuals with low self-esteem will respond to stressful events with anxiety. This is likely to intensify the individual's level of stress in two ways. First, it is highly likely that anxiety is itself stressful (cf. Gray, 1982); thus, responding to stress with anxiety will add to the stress. Second, anxiety is likely to interfere with the implementation of adaptive coping strategies to alleviate the stress, thereby prolonging and amplifying the individual's exposure to stress.

Given that anxiety and ineffective coping with stress contribute to a variety of mental health problems, individuals with low self-esteem will be particularly vulnerable to such problems. Additionally, there is now a large body of evidence that suggests that anxiety and stress cause a host of physical problems (ranging in severity from nausea to cancer) by undermining the integrity of the immune system (see e.g., Jemmott, 1985; Tecoma & Huey, 1985, for reviews of current empirical work in psychoneuroimmunology—the study of how psychological factors influence immune-system function). Thus, low self-esteem may result in physical as well as psychological problems.

Research is highly consistent with this analysis. With regard to physical problems, studies have shown a relationship between low self-esteem and poor physical health (Antonucci & Jackson, 1983), headaches (Khouri-Haddad, 1984), children's visits to school sick bays (Harper & Field, 1986), hypochondriasis (Barsky & Klerman, 1983), and nervous breakdowns (Ingham, Kretman, Miller, & Sasidharan, 1986). With regard to psychological problems, low self-esteem is associated with aggressive behavior in male children (Lochman & Lampron, 1986), bulimic behavior in women (Crowther & Chernyk, 1986), smoking in adolescence (Penny & Robinson, 1986; Ahlgren, Norem, Hochhauser, & Garvin, 1982), male spouse abuse (Goldstein & Rosenbaum, 1985; Neidig, Friedman, & Collins, 1986), depression (e.g., Brown, Andrews, Harris, & Adler, 1986; Brown, Bifulco, Harris, & Bridge, 1986; Brown, Craig, & Harris, 1985; Mollon & Parry, 1984), anxiety disorders (Strauss et al., 1987), and paranoid schizophrenia (Zigler & Glick, 1988). This is by no means a complete list of the correlational evidence linking self-esteem to a variety of psychological and physical problems. For a more complete review of this area, see Scheff et al., 1989.

Although understanding the precise nature of the relationship between self-esteem and psychological and physical adaptation will require further research, the impressive array of correlational findings indicates that the plausible terror management account of the relationship between self-esteem and anxiety and the role of self-esteem problems in psychological and psychosomatic disorders warrant serious consideration.

**CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY**

From a terror management perspective, people's psychological and physical well-being requires that they perceive themselves to be valuable members of a meaningful universe, which relieves the anxiety associated with the uniquely human awareness of death. Accordingly, health concerns are best considered as an interaction between individual and social factors. Specifically, one can ask about factors (genetic, biochemical, experiential) that make it difficult for people to acquire meaning and value regardless of specific social contexts. At the same time, one can consider how specific social contexts are more or less conducive to individual health. Effective interventions should therefore be directed toward facilitating the acquisition and maintenance of meaning and value, either at a broad social or individual level.

**Individual Level**

The individual therapeutic approach most consistent with a terror management analysis is described in Irvin Yalom's *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980). Yalom states his theoretical assumptions
about psychopathology and psychotherapy as follows:

1. The fear of death plays a major role in our internal experience; it haunts us as does nothing else; it rumbles continuously under the surface; it is a dark, unsettling presence at the rim of consciousness.

2. The child, at an early age, is pervasively preoccupied with death, and his or her major developmental task is to deal with terrifying fears of obliteration.

3. To cope with these fears, we erect defenses against death awareness, defenses that are based on denial, that shape character structure, and that if maladaptive, result in clinical syndromes. In other words, psychopathology is the result of ineffective modes of death transcendence.

4. ... a robust and effective approach to psychotherapy may be constructed on the foundation of death awareness. (pp. 27–28)

Yalom’s conceptual analysis is very close to Becker’s and our own. His clinical approach is to recognize that many (if not most) presenting symptoms when people begin therapy are maladaptive responses to the anxiety associated with the awareness of death, and to be aware that people coming to therapy are normally unaware that death concerns are related to their problems. Accordingly, Yalom tries to help clients become aware of their concerns regarding death, understand how their present problems are connected with those concerns, and agree that such responses are ineffective relative to other possibilities.

This is followed by an attempt to help clients acquire a meaningful conception of the world around them through which they can perceive themselves as valuable individuals. Yalom suggests that this can be achieved in a variety of ways, including (a) altruism (helping others), (b) dedication to a cause, (c) involvement in creative activities (or being creative regardless of what one does), (d) appreciation of life at all times (and “[retaining] one’s sense of astonishment at the miracle of life”), and (e) devotion to self-actualization (the realization of one’s own unique individual potential). A complete description of Yalom’s approach to psychotherapy is beyond the scope of this paper.

Our recommendations for therapy are similar to Yalom’s, but we are not as sure that making clients aware of their concerns about death is a necessary or useful step toward bolstering their mechanisms for minimizing such concerns. For many clients, simply strengthening their cultural anxiety buffers may be enough. Perhaps for other clients it would be necessary to strip their problems down to their essence to help them let go of maladaptive modes of coping and seek better solutions. However, this strategy is a dangerous one; accordingly, Becker (1973) advises that psychotherapists bent on providing self-knowledge to clients should provide a warning as well: “Danger: real probability of the awakening of terror and dread, from which there is no turning back.” The problem is that decay and death are inescapable physical evils that we can only deal with via fragile symbolic social constructions; and prying someone from wherever such constructions in which they are imbedded would result in boundless terror unless a viable alternative was made readily available.

We also depart from Yalom in being guided more forcefully by the distinction between value and meaning. From the terror management perspective, a client’s problems result from difficulties in sustaining one or both of the components of the cultural anxiety buffer. So for some clients, the question is, Why does the individual not have a sufficiently strong belief in his or her own value? For these clients, the solution is to help strengthen that belief, whether simply by altering cognitions about the self or, perhaps preferably, by helping the client work toward developing the skills and finding the surroundings necessary to achieve a sense of value within his or her accepted worldview (cf. Rogers, 1961).

For other clients, the problem may be the basis of self-evaluation; perhaps the client simply cannot derive value from the accepted worldview because the worldview involves excessively difficult, unrealistic standards (cf. Horney, 1950), or because the individual’s attributes and situation are simply not well-suited to attaining value from that particular worldview. Either way, the solution is to help the individual alter his or her worldview so that it can be a fruitful basis of self-esteem. One common notion propagated in many clinical settings is that the client needs to shift his or her basis of self-worth from external sources to internal ones. However, our analysis suggests that this would not be a productive strategy. Self-worth is inherently a cultural construction and thus must always be validated externally; otherwise it cannot be sustained. Therefore the client should not be focused on deriving self-esteem internally, but on adopting values, roles, and behaviors that will provide compelling, consistent social validation of his or her self-worth.
Finally, for some clients the problem may be that they simply cannot sustain faith in the worldview itself. Here again, the solution is to guide the client toward a more beneficial worldview, one that is more compelling in providing a meaningful view of reality from which a sense of personal value can be derived (cf. Rank, 1936/1978). Of course, helping individuals construct a worldview carries with it serious ethical concerns for psychotherapists who are commonly taught to avoid value judgments (regardless of the impossibility of doing so). In addition, Rank (1931, 1936) has argued that psychology is particularly well-suited for destroying worldviews but rather ill equipped for helping individuals develop them: "However, psychology, which is gradually trying to supplant religious and moral ideology, is only partially qualified to do this, because it is a preponderantly negative and disintegrating ideology..." (Rank, 1931, p. 192). Ideally, the hope is that informed psychotherapists can avoid this problem by working with the client's own beliefs and assumptions, and not imposing psychological analysis and ideology too heavily on the worldview that emerges from the therapeutic intervention.

Rank (1931, 1961), Becker (1971), and others (e.g., James, 1911) have argued that the best and highest level of meaning is what Becker refers to as the sacred level at which one links oneself to the highest power—some conception of a creator and the meaning of creation. Becker argues that this is the most psychologically beneficial level for a number of reasons. First, faith in some spiritual conception of reality offers the possibility of actual immortality, which, if one can sustain such faith, quiets the fear of death most effectively. Second, spiritual bases of meaning are less disconfirmable than more tangible bases (such as country, family, spouse, or material possessions). God cannot die, be disproven, or be found to be corrupt. Third, by serving the creator, or universal life force, or whatever, one can have a sense of cosmic value, which would certainly be the deepest sense of self-worth.

There are two problems in applying this notion to clinical issues. One is that it is not clear how an individual who was not deeply embedded in a spiritual system from early childhood on could be helped to acquire faith, or what the specific nature of that faith should be. There are, however, a wide variety of known spiritual conceptions. Perhaps the client's prior affinities for a particular approach might provide a base that can then be elaborated and strengthened (the problem then is how to help the client be courageous enough to be a "knight of faith" [Becker, 1973, based on an analysis of Kierkegaard] and maintain the security base, while acknowledging that in the modern scientific world [see our discussion of the social level] doubt is the knight's squire [cf. Bergman's 1957 film, The Seventh Seal]).

The other problem is that of the psychotherapist becoming a guru or religious authority in the client's life. Although gurus may be exactly what some people need, one most definitely would not want this to be the psychotherapist's role. However, the priests of self-insight and self-reliance must recognize that the strength of one's self-worth derives from the way in which the individual imbues the world with meaning. While it may seem that we have strayed across the line from psychology to philosophy/theology, as Rank points out, each school of psychology is a meaning system of its own, and usually (perhaps necessarily) not the most beneficial one. The reader may also wonder at this point what all of this has to do with the role of self-esteem in adaptation, but again, self-esteem is a sense of value made possible by some cultural conception of meaning that specifies what is (and is not) of value and what the requirements of being a good person are. If the goal is to help the client achieve a stronger, less vulnerable sense of self-worth, the basis of that self-worth must not be ignored as a possible cause of problems and a possible target of change.

Social Level

Freud was the first psychologist to note in *The Future of an Illusion and Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1961a, b) that to conform to social standards is by no means to be either healthy or normal, and that entire societies are by their very nature neurotic. Because culture is a humanly created social construction, all enculturated individuals are deluded to the extent that they believe their worldview to be absolutely correct and do not recognize the illusory nature of their perspectives. Enculturated individuals perceive the world as described by their culture rather than forming impressions directly based on their own interpretations of sensory information, resulting in a restricted range of potential life experiences according to cultural dictates.

This is potentially important from a clinical perspective; Becker recognized that whereas dif-
ferent cultures serve the same essential purpose—that of minimizing anxiety associated with the awareness of death—they do not all do so equally well and there are reasonably objective standards according to which the relative merits of different cultures might be compared. Specifically, Becker suggests that cultures can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which (a) physical needs for members of a group are satisfied given technical capabilities and natural resources; (b) adequate social roles are provided that allow for as many members of a group as possible to acquire and maintain self-esteem; and (c) physical and psychological needs are not satisfied at the expense of others.

Becker’s second criterion is most relevant for the present discussion. If self-esteem is a vitally important component of human adaptation as we propose, and if self-esteem consists of the belief that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe, then self-esteem is derived entirely from the cultural context in which one resides. There are two important implications of this notion. First, a behavior considered valuable and meaningful in one social milieu, and that would consequently confer immense self-esteem, might be deemed meaningless or humiliating in a different social context and would therefore confer no esteem or cause the loss of self-esteem. For example, in the Sambia tribe of New Guinea a normal part of the transition to heterosexual adulthood for boys includes performing fellatio on male elders of the tribe (Herdt, 1982). While most American males would find this ritual severely threatening to self-esteem, an American-born infant raised to adolescence in that culture would most likely gain self-esteem from it. Conversely, a male member of the Sambia tribe would not derive much self-esteem from wearing a suit and tie, and carrying a wallet full of little plastic cards, unless he were brought up by Americans.

Perhaps more importantly, recognizing that the bases of self-esteem are cultural contrivances allows direct comparisons between different cultures; a given culture’s designation of what is meaningful and valuable provides opportunities for the greatest number of people to acquire and maintain self-esteem.

Rank observed, for example, that Christianity in the middle ages was an excellent worldview in terms of the potential for acquiring self-esteem, because Christians were told that they were all equally valuable in the eyes of God and that eternal life was dependent on living the good life regardless of one’s material or social status. Thus, all Christians had the opportunity to acquire self-esteem because they were potentially able to adhere to the standards of appropriate behavior mandated by their reference group. Conversely, many have observed (e.g., Albee, 1986; Sampson, 1985) that it is very difficult to feel good about oneself in America because the standards by which we are taught to judge ourselves are not realistically attainable for most of our population. In America, people are deemed successful only to the extent that they have acquired enormous material resources, power over others, or are the best at what they do. The problem is that in a hierarchically stratified society only a few can have money and power (they tend to go together), because money and power are derived from, and depend on, large numbers of people who have less of both. Consequently, we are a society that virtually ensures low self-esteem for many of its members by setting goals that most people, even with the best intentions, cannot fulfill.

Consider for example, a recent American Express television commercial where a businessman is feverishly trying to get home on a miserable rainy evening to see his daughter perform as a flower in the school play. His flight is canceled, and an inquiry to the airlines finds only first class seats on another flight, which he is able to get because he has the American Express card. When he arrives at his destination, he is able to get cash with the card to take a limousine directly to the school to watch the play, while the rabble wait in the rain hoping for cabs or buses. The commercial ends with the reminder that “membership has its privileges,” the implication of course being that those with means deserve to be able to do these things, while those without such means are wretched failures who do not deserve to see their children grow up in the same fashion as their more worthy counterparts.

The general point here is that Americans are constantly reminded (a) that success consists of the increasing consumption of goods and services (and conversely that one who does not or cannot do this is a failure); (b) that we are also taught to believe that we all have an equal opportunity to acquire such wealth and are thus responsible for not doing so; and (c) that in fact the structure and organization of a capital-based economy depends on massive numbers of people engaged in relatively trivial occupations for meager compensation. The effect of this type of social arrangement is
that it is very difficult to acquire and maintain self-esteem for many people, because the standards of value by which we are taught to judge ourselves are so difficult to obtain. This analysis may help account for the prevalence of depression and anxiety-related disorders in contemporary American society.

In addition to the difficulty of obtaining value within the context of contemporary western society, Becker and Rank have noted that current western worldviews are also especially ill-suited for deriving meaning. Specifically, for centuries western societies were dominated by a Christian cosmology, which offered all the possibility for acquiring meaning and value by living the good life. What a person had was unimportant relative to what one did and how one did it, because God did not discriminate between the president of a large corporation and a sewer worker; both would go to heaven as long as each behaved in a Christian fashion. Similarly, in traditional tribal cultures all members of the tribe had a role in the tribal rituals, which provided cosmic significance.

Such cosmologies are now very difficult to accept by many for four historical reasons. First, Darwin’s theory of evolution made it extremely difficult for all but the willfully ignorant to accept a literal interpretation of the Christian worldview. In other words, Christianity has been massively undermined by the present Western conception of reality. Second, the scientific revolution has resulted in magnificent achievements in many physical domains (e.g., agriculture and medicine), making the scientific worldview extremely compelling.

Centuries ago people would appeal to God when the crops failed or when they broke a leg; now the same problems would prompt a visit to a botanist and physician, respectively. Third, Christianity has never been able to deliver on earth what it promises in heaven, namely genuine equality for all (cf. Becker, 1975). The church has generally supported the powers that be, defending the privileges of few against the rights of many.

Finally, the division of labor and assembly lines resulting from the industrial revolution have changed what the average individual does on a daily basis. As Fromm (1941) argued, following the industrial revolution, division of labor and assembly line activities have improved our physical well-being, while at the same time divesting us of the sense of value that comes from creative work. The person who used to make a shoe or a car now puts a heel on a shoe or an ashtray in a car as it goes through an assembly line, or perhaps collects tolls in a small booth for 8 hours or works third shift in a gas station or convenience store, doing virtually nothing except generating revenue for someone else.

All of the factors mentioned above have transformed people from creative individuals encouraged to cooperate with each other in the service of higher powers into pathetic consumers who measure themselves against others by what they have instead of by what they do and how they do it. Because it is currently hard to sustain faith in an invisible dimension (i.e., spirits and deities), meaning and hence value can only be obtained through the accumulation of more things than those around you (i.e., tangible proof of your worth). This can at best provide a very fragile sense of meaning and self-worth that is difficult to maintain; whatever you have is not enough because it’s not all of it, and someone else surely has more than you do anyway. Consequently, the only way to procure value in the context of this type of social arrangement is to perceive yourself as superior to others, and as Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) recognized:

If you have to maintain self-esteem by pulling down the standing of others, you are extraordinarily unfortunate in a variety of ways. Since you have to protect your feeling of personal worth by noting how unworthy everybody around you is, you are not provided with any data that are convincing evidence of your having personal worth, so it gradually evolves into “I am not as bad as the other swine.” To be the best of swine, when it would be nice to be a person, is not a particularly good way of furthering anything except security operations, (p. 242)

At this point the reader might be wondering about how all of this could possibly be relevant for clinical practice. Terror management theory suggests that mental health concerns cannot be properly understood without evaluating the social context in which those concerns occur, and that effective therapy requires constructive social change and/or convincing people in unhealthy social contexts that the basis of meaning and value prescribed by that context is by no means absolute, which then allows for the possibility that those people can seek meaning and value elsewhere. Albee (1982) has argued that social change directed at reducing unnecessary stress (access to basic resources necessary for physical survival) and enhancing social competence, self-esteem, and social support networks may be the only via-
ble form of therapeutic intervention for most people, as there are many more people in need of psychological interventions (most lacking the financial resources to procure them) than there are people to provide such services.

One interesting implication of this conceptual analysis pertains to the role of the social sciences in the development and maintenance of cultural worldviews. As Skinner (see Walden Two [1948] and/or Beyond Freedom and Dignity [1971]) has forcefully argued for decades, the human race seems to be on a self-determined collision course with extinction caused by violence, overpopulation, and destruction of the environment, and solutions to these problems are best sought through science. Do we want our world described to us, our problems analyzed, and solutions suggested to us by the likes of Reagan, Kadaffi, and Khomeini, or should these concerns be relegated to the sciences?

Skinner argues that we stand a better chance of survival if these concerns are broached scientifically, but unfortunately his conceptual analysis does not lead to fruitful suggestions in that regard. Specifically, Skinner insists that because all behavior is determined by responses to external contingencies, that constructive social changes must be effected by altering those contingencies through positive reinforcement in order to get people to behave in a less destructive fashion. The problem is that Skinner cannot specify in advance what those contingencies are, although he insists that a retrospective analysis of any behavior would necessarily reveal the specific environmental factors responsible for the behavior. Because Skinner does not distinguish between the basic predispositions of a lizard and that of a person, he cannot make any informed predictions about what might be reinforcing. (A critical examination of Skinner’s analysis of human behavior is far beyond the scope of this work. We believe that his perspective is wrong, but for the purposes of the present discussion we are confining our concerns to the argument that his perspective is simply not useful, which may be the only legitimate basis by which scientific claims can be evaluated. See, for example, Laudan, 1977.)

In contrast, terror management theory presumes that there is a fundamental difference between humans and other living organisms that renders us responsive to different types of reinforcement by virtue of our having different needs (i.e., meaning and value). Consequently, we suggest that inasmuch as people are motivated to reduce anxiety through the acquisition of meaning and value (i.e., self-esteem), applied social science should be directed toward the development and maintenance of worldviews that maximize the equitable distribution of material resources and development of nondestructive technologies, which emphasize social roles that confer the possibility of acquiring self-esteem to as many people as possible, and which do so at a minimum of expense to others.

When these standards are applied to our own culture, we must somberly recognize that the American way of life is not particularly conducive to mental health. Note that this is not a political judgment, but instead follows directly from our conceptual analysis of what mental health is and how it is acquired. While we have argued that American culture does not provide adequate opportunities to acquire value and meaning, Marcus (1955) and others have also noted that American culture fails miserably in terms of Becker’s two other criteria for evaluating the utility of specific cultures. Specifically, many of our citizens lack access to basic resources necessary for physical survival (e.g., adequate food, housing, medical care, education, etc.) despite the obvious fact that we possess the technology and resources to provide for the satisfaction of those needs. Additionally, others outside and inside American culture have paid a dear price for the psychological and physical comfort of the majority. Specifically, this comfort level was made possible in part by the support of and investment in innumerable tyrannical, racist, and oppressive activities in a variety of other countries, along with the wanton exploitation of immigrants and other minority group members within the United States.

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